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ABSTRACT

This article provides a rationale to support the position that the violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was driven by the attempt of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to choose violence, suicide, and death as an alternative to the pain caused by a negative self-concept and a lack of meaning in their attempt to resolve questions of self-acceptance and identity. The search for meaning is viewed as a search for self-acceptance, self-esteem, and identity. In contrast to the seek and weed-out approach to ending school violence, a broader based school-environment approach is taken by recommending a number of schoolwide conditions and practices that can act as powerful facilitators of positive meaning for all students. Briefly, these conditions and practices are as follows: (1) building trust relationships between students and between students and teachers; (2) reduction in school size; and (3) implementation of small-group learning activities. The article supports the conclusion that the building of trust relationships between students and between students and teachers together with the reduction of school size and the implementation of small-group learning activities can prevent school violence by facilitating positive meaning for all students. (Contains 27 references.) (Author/RT)

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THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: THE COLUMBINE TRAGEDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO PREVENT FUTURE SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This article provides a rationale to support the position that the violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado was driven by the attempt of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to choose violence, suicide and death as an alternative to the pain caused by a negative self concept and a lack of meaning in their attempt to resolve questions of self acceptance and identity. The search for meaning is viewed as a search for self acceptance, self esteem and identity.

In contrast to the seek and weed out approach to ending school violence, the writer takes a broader based school environment approach by recommending a number of school wide conditions and practices that can act as powerful facilitators of positive meaning for all students. Briefly these conditions and practices are: 1) building trust relationships between students and between students and teachers 2) reduction in school size and 3) the implementation of small group learning activities.

The article supports the conclusion that the building of trust relationships between students and between students and teachers together with the reduction of school size and the implementation of small group learning activities prevent school violence by facilitating positive meaning for all students.

Every year on the average more than 1,500 American youngsters under the age of eighteen take the life of another person and are arrested for murder or manslaughter. Recent U.S. Department of Justice figures maintain that nearly ten people each day are murdered by juveniles (Davis 2000, p. 55). According to Davis (2000), a negative self concept (feelings of inferiority and inadequacy) coupled with peer rejection and low frustration tolerance directly impact on the adolescent tendency to express violent behavior. In the article a negative self concept and low self esteem is equated with a state of confusion in the adolescent's search for meaning and self acceptance, self esteem and an acceptable identity. The lack of meaning is coexistent with the pain and confusion that normally accompanies the adolescent's attempt to resolve questions of identity and self acceptance. According to Berson and Berson (1999), there are obvious clues to affirm the pain that the adolescent feels during this state of confusion. These clues include social isolation, loneliness, poor impulse control, defying authority, mood swings and an obsession with weapons, violence and death.

The sense of confusion and lack of meaning during adolescence has not been helped by the rapid change and decline of family and religious values. Indeed, a commitment to a set of consistent and reliable values is at the very heart of the adolescent's search for identity, self acceptance and meaning. Therefore; this rapid change and decline in family and religious values has made the search for meaning and an acceptable identity a more difficult adolescent task. According to Hunter (1998), the need to establish meaning has made the adolescent prone to membership in cults and radical groups. The attraction to membership in cults and radical groups is viewed here as an honest attempt to find meaning and a consistent set of values. However; as Hunter (1998) notes, membership in cults and radical groups only suppresses individuality and fosters more confusion, pain and estrangement from society.

This article will attempt to: 1) provide a rationale to support the position that the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado was driven by the attempt of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to choose violence, suicide and death as an alternative to the pain and confusion caused by a lack of meaning and a sense of identity confusion and 2) to recommend a number of school environment conditions and practices that prevent school violence by facilitating positive meaning for all adolescents.

No one can predict which kids will turn to violence. However; as Crawley (2001, p. 58) notes, violence is an attempt to find meaning by turning humiliation into pride. Humiliation, according to Staub and Rosenthal (1994) , usually has a component in the form of social rejection. Interviews reported by Gibbs and Roche (1999) leave little doubt about the humiliation in the form of peer rejection experienced by Harris and Klebold. One student describes the social climate this way: "Columbine is a clean and good place except for those rejects", in reference to Harris and Klebold and their friends. "Most students didn't want them there". (Gibbs and Roche 1999, p. 50) It probably goes without saying then, that the social rejection that accompanied Harris and Klebold's attempt to find meaning in the cult of Nazi values and membership in a group called "The Trench Coat Maffia" was perhaps the spark that ignited their feelings of desperation and confusion. Left on their own to find meaning in values and group membership that furthered their estrangement from society they chose violence, suicide and death as the only solution to find meaning and stop their suffering.

Harris and Klebold's attempt to find meaning was best represented in the *Time* magazine article, "The Columbine Tapes" by Gibbs and Roche (1999). Quoting their words from actual tapes the article reports on their verbal dialogue shortly before the massacre. In effect they said, "Isn't it going to be fun to get the respect we are going to deserve." (Gibbs and Roche 1999, p. 44) Elsewhere in the article the FBI agent, Holstraw, observed "They wanted to be famous and they are. They're infamous." (Gibbs and Roche 1999, p. 42) The fact that they anticipated a sense of respect and identity from the impact of being known historically as the individuals who planned and carried out the massacre is testament to their state of confusion and need to find meaning in violence and death.

The events of Columbine have caused educators to examine clues that might lead to school violence. According to Arman (2000), it is crystal clear that schools need to make real changes in school violence prevention by identifying at risk students. Morse (2000) has emphasized the possibility of a "no tolerance and expulsion" policy for identified high risk students. However; as Arman (2000) contends, such policies run the risk of alienating students who are crying out for help through their violent or negative behavior. Interestingly, a number of other critics (see for example, Morse 2000; Mulvey and Cauffman 2001) contend that there is simply no way to weed out the Harris' and Klebold's from their merely cranky classmates. In contrast to the seek and weed out approach to ending school violence the writer takes a broader based school environment approach by recommending a number of school wide conditions and practices that can act as powerful facilitators of positive meaning for all students. Briefly these conditions and practices are: 1) the building of trust relationships between students and between teachers and students 2) reduction in school size and 3) the implementation of small group learning activities.

The Building of Trust Relationships

Trust relationships between students and between students and teachers are effective facilitators of positive meaning for all adolescents by fostering a sense of identity and self acceptance. Furthermore, empirical evidence seems to support the contention that promoting healthy social relationships is far more effective for reducing violence and crime than punitive penalties. (Nettles, Michera and Jones 2000)

Trust in close relationships has been defined by Rempel and others (2001 p. 58) as the confidence that another will act in ways that fulfill their basic need for self acceptance and identity. Distrust, according to Fuller (1996), tends to provoke feelings of fear, causing people to feel unworthy and ill at ease. Moreover; low trust relationships according to Rempel (2001 p. 58), tend to amplify the implications of another's negative behavior and minimize the implications of positive actions. Viewed from the above perspective, schools characterized by low trust relationships run the risk of causing individuals to feel unworthy and possibly rejected by peers and teachers.

Certainly, it is normal for the adolescent to act out and experiment with a variety of life styles in the process of establishing identity and self acceptance. According to Edens and others

(2001), the selection of divergent life styles are common and transitory aspects of normal adolescent development and may be easily misinterpreted when using standard approaches. Harris and Klebold's membership in the so-called "Trench Coat Maffia" together with their attraction to the cult of Nazi values is viewed here as such as an experiment in the normal process of establishing meaning and an acceptable identity. Trust in others becomes a facilitator of meaning and self acceptance when others accept them as a person regardless of their attitude or life styles. Not to be confused here; it is critically important to point out that in building and maintaining trust relationships the teacher or significant other is not required to accept violent actions and abusive behavior of the adolescent. However, in the attempt to maintain trust relationships and facilitate positive meaning the teacher or significant other must continue to respect the adolescent's well being as a person they care about.

Having their normal adolescent attempt to find meaning by acting out divergent values and a socially rejected life style it is not difficult to understand how mistrust, a lack of meaning and a state of identity confusion would result. The foregoing would suggest that many adolescents need help in trusting others on their journey to establish meaning and a true sense of identity.

Reduction in School Size

Borrowing a quote from Alphie Kohn, Hardy (1999 p. 2) states, "What could be worse for kids than to plop them in a great factory of a school, a huge seemingly uncaring place where they feel invisible, anonymous and lost". To the writer, feelings of being invisible and lost are tantamount to the pain that accompanies a lack of meaning and a sense of confusion in the adolescent's search for identity and self acceptance.

According to Raywid and Ashyama (2000), youngsters in smaller schools rarely display their anger at the institution and its inhabitants that typify large comprehensive high schools similar to Columbine. Raywid and Ashyama (2000) have gone on to say that violence is much less likely to happen in small schools because students behave better in schools where they are known and have a greater opportunity to establish identity through personal involvement and active participation. Reduction in school size with corresponding opportunities for involvement through active participation in school related activities is likely to prevent violence by providing important facilitators of positive meaning for all students.

Bobbitt and others (1992) have made reference to large schools as numbering more than 750 students. Small schools were defined as 750 students or less. Lindsay (1982) found greater student participation together with corresponding feelings of acceptance and student belonging in small schools. Similarly, Barker and Gump (1964) concluded that smaller schools have the advantage of affecting greater student participation and related personal satisfaction. Conversely, Page (1990) concluded that adolescents in large schools are at high risk for the occurrence of loneliness and peer rejection. Predictably, then it appears that school violence is likely to occur in larger rather than smaller schools. (Astore, et. al. 1999)

Finally, the above would appear to support the conclusion that smaller schools have the

advantage of fostering positive meaning for all students by providing greater chances for active student involvement and participation in an atmosphere of supportive peer relationships.

The Implementation of Small Group Learning Activities

Like reduction in school size the implementation of small group learning activities act to facilitate positive meaning and a sense of identity for all adolescents by providing increased opportunities for active student involvement, status and personal recognition. One of the most important goals of life is to attain an acceptance in the groups to which we belong (Hamachek p. 563). According to Anderson (2001 p. 116), this status is defined by the amount of respect, influence and prominence each member of a group enjoys in the eyes of others. A number of writers (Dittes 1959; Jackson 1953; and Stotland 1959) have concluded that feelings about self and attraction to a group will be affected by the extent to which the individual is accepted and valued by other members of the group. Small group learning activities would appear to have an advantage for providing an increased chance for active participation together with corresponding opportunities to find meaning by acquiring status and prestige in the eyes of other group members.

Slater (1958) has shown that a group of five members were, at least from the subjects point of view, most effective in dealing with intellectual tasks. Correspondingly, Aronson (1978), one of the leading social psychologists and award winning authority on how society shapes behavior, has advocated a small group learning activity called "the jigsaw classroom". Briefly, the activity works like this: students are divided into groups of five. Each student is assigned to research and report on part of a joint project. For example, if the topic were World War II one person reports on Hitler's rise to power, another reports on the D Day Invasion and still another reports on the use and development of the atomic bomb. The active participation with a corresponding chance to make contributions that are appreciated and valued by other group members would be a powerful facilitator of positive meaning and identity for all five jigsaw group members. In addition, jigsaw group members as reported by Crawley (2001 p. 59), were found to have more empathy and compassion for their schoolmates.

Summary

This article has attempted to provide the reader with a rationale that supports the position that the violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado was driven by the attempt of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to choose violence, suicide and death as an alternative to the pain and confusion caused by a lack of meaning and a state of identity confusion. The lack of meaning was equated with failed attempts to establish a consistent set of personal values and resolve questions of self acceptance and identity.

As an alternative to the seek and weed out approach to ending school violence the writer has recommended a number of school wide conditions and practices that can act as powerful facilitators of positive meaning for all adolescents. Briefly these recommendations were: 1) the building of trust relationships between students and between teachers and students 2) reduction in school size and 3) the implementation of small group learning activities.

The article supported the conclusion that reduction in school size together with the implementation of small group learning activities provide a powerful facilitator of positive meaning for all adolescents by reducing the risk of loneliness and by providing a greater chance to be known and valued through active participation. At the same time, it was pointed out that trust relationships between adolescents and others facilitate positive meaning when others value and accept the adolescent as a person they care about regardless of their attitude and life style.

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